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The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth

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The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth
by Mark Mazzetti. New York, The Penguin Press, 2013. 327 pp. \$22.09.

The tragic events of September 11 brought many changes for the American people. Some of these were obvious to the public—a renewed sense of ‘Americanism,’ support for a stronger commander-in-chief, and a desire for a stronger military. Others, though, were more covert. Mark Mazzetti examines these covert changes as they transformed the Central Intelligence Agency, the Department of Defense, and ultimately American foreign policy in his new book *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth*. Mazzetti sheds light on government cover-ups, secret wars, expensive mistakes, and the new foreign policy of the United States.

After September 11, the CIA truly becomes the “secret army” Mazzetti references in the title of his book. Through presidential discretion they gained power and a “license to kill (p.9)”. Instead of gathering information on targets as the CIA had traditionally done, they became obsessed with secret operations and began to fight terrorism in a more aggressive way by sending covert teams to kidnap, torture, or even kill their targets. This pattern of targeted killing was only aided by the technological and political evolution of drones: “Armed drones, and targeted killing in general, offered a new direction for a spy agency that had begun to feel burned by its years in the detention-and-interrogation business (p.121)”. Drones, like undercover agents, allowed the CIA to kill specific targets that were difficult to access; however, drones made this possible without risking American lives.

Mazzetti articulated it flawlessly, stating, “The CIA is no longer a traditional espionage service, devoted to stealing the secrets of foreign governments. The CIA has become a killing machine, an organization consumed with man-hunting (p.4)”. This man-hunting did not just occur in Afghanistan, either; the CIA eventually began carrying out missions in areas outside of declared war zones. For example, Chapter 14 describes the story of Raymond Davis and his undercover activities in Pakistan, a country allied with the United States.

The Department of Defense also changed after September 11. Previously known for being the sector that carried out warfare, it now took on the role that the CIA had left behind—

gathering information. They realized that “the Pentagon needed to start sending soldiers into places where—by law and tradition—only spies had been allowed to go (p.20)”. However, the Department of Defense was held to different legal standards than spy agencies and had to be careful not to over step their limitations. To stay relevant with this method of modern day warfare and do so as legally as possible, the Department of Defense needed to find a way around the laws restricting them from spying. Their solution, Mazzetti argues, was private contractors.

These private contractors had the ability to do what the Department of Defense could not: infiltrate other countries and gather information and intelligence. As Mazzetti states, “commando teams [were now] running spying missions that Washington would never have dreamed of approving in the years before 9/11 (p.4)”. He supports this argument with several stories, one of these being the story of Jan Obrman and his International Media Ventures. Not only was he attempting to gather information, but also spread a positive image of America abroad. However, other people, as he illustrated with Michele Ballarin, used these Department of Defense contracts to advance their own personal gain. No matter the motive, the information these private contractors gathered was not always reliable, and it was difficult to obtain funding for them. However, it was a way for the Department of Defense to form a “shadow CIA (p.198)” and gather information rather than merely fight.

Throughout the book, Mazzetti uses information from a variety of sources to support his arguments. He utilizes top-secret documents, eyewitness accounts, and interviews with the actual players present during this shift in American foreign policy. All of these references function to make *The Way of the Knife* extremely detailed and engaging for the reader. His information is both amazing and appalling; unearthing shadow wars in Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia, and covert operations around the rest of the world.

The most prominent positive feature Mazzetti utilizes in *The Way of the Knife* is his writing. Mazzetti’s combination of narrative and expository writing gives this book an informative, fast-paced storyline, all while keeping the reader engaged. He also manages to maintain a journalistic stance throughout the book, not showing any extremely evident bias. However, there is a considerable amount of bias from the interviews Mazzetti uses. Although

some of this bias is unavoidable, and in some cases works to reaffirm his argument, it is evident in every topic and there are various places where it could be removed.

There were some other issues with the book as well. Mazzetti uses various stories to describe a situation and the broader idea behind it. This works very well to keep readers engaged while providing them with crucial knowledge of American foreign policy. However, in several chapters—especially those related to killing operations—these stories jump around, sometimes making it difficult for the reader to follow and diminishing the overall point Mazzetti is trying to make.

Overall, Mazzetti does a remarkable job of showing how the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense changed after September 11 and the effects this had on American foreign policy. For the CIA, this came through targeted killings and the use of drone strikes. For the Department of Defense, this came through a desire for information and the use of private contractors to provide this information. Mazzetti uses a variety of sources and expertly creates a story that is not only entertaining for the reader, but also incredibly informative of the secret operations and shadow wars America has been involved in for the past few decades.

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